Endowed Presbyterian Churches Conference

Worship Service

Friday, October 4, 1991, 7:00 p.m.

THE VALUE OF YOUR MONEY

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Mark 10:17-27

How hard it will be for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!

My, I wish he hadn't said that!... In his book, Harvard Diary, child psychiatrist, teacher and author, Robert Coles, reports his research on how children of wealthy families come to their values. He was particularly interested in how religious, church families dealt with the ethical issues of their own wealth. A prosperous New Orleans attorney said...

> "I can find passages to make me feel good about this life I've always enjoyed, and always will enjoy until I die. But I have a legal mind - I majored in English, liked literary criticism...so I can't overlook what I read. I can't turn a clear-cut message into a confusing one... He gave us that unforgettable image of the camel trying to get through the eye of a needle. Well, I guess I'm one big camel, and even now, I can anticipate the crunch I'll be in."
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> Coles said: "It was one of the most Biblical moments I will ever experience - the sight and sound of a professing Christian aware that he was in deep trouble." Harvard Diary, "Christ and the Rich," p. 19-21]

It is a troublesome topic, this matter of Christ and wealth. There was a legendary incident once involving John D. Rockefeller, Jr. and Harry Emerson Fosdick. Rockefeller was the wealthiest Protestant layperson in the country. He was a devout Baptist.

Rockefeller had a vision of the church of the future - non-sectarian, rational, world-embracing. He wanted the leading preacher of the day, Harry Emerson Fosdick, to be the pastor.

Fosdick, in the meantime, was being thrown out of the Presbyterian Church for being too progressive. Rockefeller was successful. Fosdick was called. Riverside Church was built and was, and is, an embodiment of Rockefeller's vision. The legendary incident occurred in the early stages of negotiations between the wealthy Rockefeller and the progressive preacher. (They later became dear and life-long friends.) In Rockefeller's office, Fosdick was protesting that "he did not wish to be known as the pastor of the richest man in the country." Rockefeller responded, "Do you think that more people will criticize you on account of my wealth, than will criticize me on account of your theology?" [Robert Moats Miller, Harry Emerson Fosdick, Preacher, Pastor, Prophet, p. 161-162]

Now we may not be as large a camel as the attorney and we surely do not relate to the Rockefeller fortune, but I would propose to you that the differences are in degree and not essence. Comedian George Carlin knows that when he talks about our "stuff." We have to have more space, not so much to live in particularly, but to keep, protect and display our "stuff." One of the observable characteristics, and consistent behaviorism of the young urbanite, is apartment hunting. The reason is that being upwardly mobile means accumulating "stuff." We need more walls for our art, shelves for the stereo, drawers, closets, square feet... Some of us know about that very personally. If you didn't have much "stuff" as a child, chances are your "stuff" is pretty important to you. If you are defined economically by the Great Depression and therefore had parents who were frugal, never bought on credit, thought that even gasoline credit cards were evil and gasped when you told them what your last mortgage was - you know what I mean and "stuff" is important to you.

There is a lot of ambiguity and discomfort about this topic and it is very much heightened by an incident which occurs in the Gospel Narrative. A wealthy young man runs to Jesus, throws himself at his feet, creating an interesting contrast to say the least: an aristocrat kneeling at the feet of a poor man and asking what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus recites the second section of the Ten Commandments which the young man has already kept. That is to say, he has done all the right things but he still doesn't feel right. He hasn't experienced God's love and his own salvation. Please notice how gentle Jesus is with him. He does not criticize or condemn. He simply issues a prescription: five imperatives: go - sell all - give to the poor - come - follow me. I don't know whether Mark had his tongue in his cheek when he wrote the next line, but I think he must have. It's a funny line. The young man's "countenance fell..." I should guess so. He was appalled, as a matter of fact, for Mark observes, "he had great possessions." He had a lot of stuff and he loved it.

The young man fades and Jesus makes an observation about wealth which astonishes his disciples. The official teaching of Judaism was that wealth is ordinarily evidence of divine blessing. But Jesus said, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."

There have been some very imaginative attempts to get us out from under that one. In fact, the textual scholars who spend their time examining ancient manuscripts under a microscope say that there is evidence that this text has been tampered with repeatedly. We aren't the first ones, apparently, to wish he didn't say it or mean it.

Later scholars would try to help by pointing out that the Greek word for "rope" is quite similar to the word for camel and that what Jesus probably said was that it is easier for a rope, a piece of twine, to go through the eye of a needle. At least the image is consistent. The task is difficult, but, in a sense, doable.

The most imaginative effort is the suggestion that ancient city walls had small openings through which late arrivers might safely enter the city without the danger of opening the gates. This opening, they contend, was called the "eye of the needle." A camel could get through on his knees, with his owner pushing and pulling. It's a wonderful image. Preachers on Stewardship Sunday have been known to suggest that loaded camels, particularly, are going to have difficulty, and that the way to squeeze in is to unload some of the goods - as in a pledge to the church. It is an approach to fund raising not to be taken lightly. Scholars trace this interpretation to the ninth century and sadly conclude that the whole matter is spurious.

What we really must do is go back and look again at this interesting, wealthy young man. What actually was wrong with him? He's not bad. In fact, he's good, admirable, upright, generous and he is theologically sensitive. He's got courage and character. What's wrong here? What about him causes him to miss the grace and love of Jesus Christ? He is, by the way, the only person in the gospel of Mark, who Jesus calls and who does not respond by following. He can't. He's not free to do this. That's what is wrong. He's imprisoned, I think, by his possessions. He's even sorry about it. There's a sense in which he knows what's wrong. In point of fact, what Jesus teaches him is that he doesn't own a thing actually. He's owned by his possessions, in service to them, dependent on them for happiness, security and joy.

He has worked so hard, been so successful, accomplished so much that there is no room in his life for grace; maybe there is a very fundamental character defect here. He's in a hurry, no

time, no empty spaces for the surprising gifts of beauty God's world gives, no place perhaps for gifts of friendship and love.

It is not appropriate to resolve the tension in this text too quickly or easily. I believe it was meant to make us uncomfortable and reflective. But it is fair to observe that Jesus did not say go - sell - give, to every wealthy person he encountered. He had wealthy friends: Nicodemus, Zacheus, Joseph of Arimathea. He didn't tell them to sell it all. What he said to this young man was his personal prescription for salvation.

There is, I would submit, no more important task for modern American Christians than coming to terms with the reality of value and wealth. Bob Lynn, former executive with the Lilly Foundation, said one time that the American mainline church has to do one of two things soon: either come to a new understanding of its own affluence or else get poor. I have been pondering that for several years and know he is right. I don't know what Jesus would say to us - nor to our church... But I do think that selling all and giving it away may be easier than his saying to us, as churches and individuals... "Use it responsibly and faithfully; figure it out - put it to work in the continuing creation and redemption of the world."

I have a few suggestions, actually. The **first** thing to do is to stop feeling guilty for who we are. Douglas John Hall, in a book on the topic, <u>The Steward: A Biblical Image Come of Age</u>, points out how useless it is for middle class Western Christians to feel guilty for being middle class Western Christians. "One can sympathize with the impatience and occasional anger of ordinary people when they are addressed as if they were directly to blame for the abject poverty of multitudes...," a lesson for every preacher who has been tempted to scold the men and women who come to worship on Sunday for world starvation.

The **second** thing is not to resolve the tension Jesus created too easily by suggesting that we're not wealthy. We are wealthy. We are the wealthiest people in the world and in all of history. And as the Japanese pass us in most of the measurable categories of wealth, most of us will still be incredibly rich.

The **third** thing is to listen to Jesus and to hear what he said.

He did not condemn wealth. Wealth is not an evil in itself. Wealth - is simply wealth - if you have it, there are always questions about whether you took it from someone, which is always bad. But wealth itself is not essentially evil.

The **fourth** thing is to understand how intimate and personal this subject is for all of us. The detail that jumped out of this text for me is the note that when the young man said he had

done all that the law required and still didn't feel right, Jesus "looking upon him, loved him." And then later, it happened again. The disciples are astonished at the eye of the needle business and Jesus "looks at them" in love and compassion and grace. This is personal. This is very near the heart of the matter for them and for us.

I think there is a sense in which he was absolutely, literally, fundamentally, accurate about the way things are with you and me - 2,000 years later.

There is a sense in which you and I don't own a thing which we are not willing to give away.

There is a sense in which you and I are owned by whatever we cannot and will not give away: a sense in which who we are is defined very precisely by what we can or cannot give away.

That's the issue here. Let's not resolve it too easily and let's not compromise it. With the disciples, I am astonished - not simply by the demands he seems to be making of me - but by the truth I know in what he said. I identify with that rich young man. I don't own anything I can't give away. You can't live until you know something for which you are willing to give everything, including your life.

The final word is grace. Truly. Costly grace. With God all things are possible. You don't have to force it, or drag it in. He said it. "All things are possible with God," including that most unlikely thing of all - our salvation. He's not done with that young man. "Jesus, looking upon him, loved him." God wants all of us to live fully, joyfully, free from frustration, anxiety and fear.

It's what the Gospel is about.

There is no resolution in text, nor is there much of a concluding resolution to these reflections. The words must take their own shape in your life - in ways known best and only to you. But do hear them again:

" - go - sell - give - come - follow - and you will have treasure in heaven."